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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

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The following has been written by the Rev. Daisuke Kitagawa of the World Council of Churches staff. It is based upon his own experience and correspondence with Mr. Kotani.

RURAL EVANGELISM IN JAPAN

Thousands of young farmers are now beginning to behave as self-respecting, public-minded, responsible citizens and free moral agents, striving not only for their own gain, but for the reconstruction of their nation and the establishment of world peace! This is an exciting news to anybody who knew pre-war rural Japan. It is even more exciting to Christians throughout the world because here is a story of lay evangelism in terms of Christian social action among the rural people of Japan who have so far been hardly touched by the organized churches and who have been decidedly apathetic toward Christianity.

The founder-director of the movement known as Aino-kai (love of agriculture), Mr. Junichi Kotani, is a farmer's son who was converted to Christianity at the age of 17. He knew all the problems of the Japanese farmers at first hand as he grew up among them. Determined to do his share in helping them, he worked his way through the University of Kyoto School of Agriculture. Following Japan's defeat in the last war he confided in several like-minded Christian farmers and they together started an organized effort to help peasants to help themselves.

For generations Japanese farmers have been victims of the most thoroughgoing pattern of feudalistic landlordism. "Let them neither die nor live" was an apt dictum to describe the policy of the ruling classes ever since the Tokugawa period. Farmers of Japan had completely lost their initiative and incentive. The post-war Land Reform changed the situation at least objectively. A majority of farmers are now holders of their own land, however small. They now can, if they will, act on their own initiative and on their own decision. They can, if they will, organize themselves to combine their resources, unite their efforts and coordinate their activities so as to improve their economic condition and to raise their standard of living.

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

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If only they had a will ! Then they could do something for themselves. They would have willed, if they could have seen that the factors which used to oppress them have crumbled down together with the old structures ! The tragic thing is that having been made free they are not conscious of their freedom or the potentialities which are theirs in this freedom. No measure along the line of technical improvement and economic aid can finally help them unless and until they become fully aware of the new situation in which they live and of their rights and privileges, responsibilities and obligations as free citizens of a free society. In short, the first order of business for rural reconstruction is the re-making of the rural man. This indeed is what the Aino-kai is attempting to do.

At first, in the face of the acute shortage of food, they were compelled to concentrate their efforts on the technical study of the method to increase food production, which of course attracted a large number of farmers. They soon learned, however, mere technical improvement, though a worthy service to peasantry, was not a real help to them unless accompanied by character-building of the farmers themselves. Ultimately the agricultural village as a whole must experience a renewal and transformation within the context of a newly developing national economy; in other words, community development (mura-zukuri). For it economic-technical development to improve the material aspect of the farmer's life (mono-zukuri) must be coupled with a radical remaking of their character (hito-zukuri). So persuaded, these men ventured to establish a training center under the name of Aino-Gakuen (Agricultural Academy).

The Academy has a three-year training course in agricultural techniques, a short refresher course twice a year during the off-season, and a three- to four week course of a "Bridal Academy" for rural girls. Daily Bible study occupies a central part of the curriculum of every course. Besides the Academy, the Aino-kai's activities include publication of three different types of periodicals by which it is attempted to foster the sense of self-respect and community spirit among the farmers of Japan as well as to help elevate the level of their skills and standard of living.

Mr. Kotani says, "Rural Japan has been for centuries completely alien and hostile to Christianity. Protestantism has hardly taken root in rural Japan. One of the chief reasons for this, of course, is that its whole ethos was made so thoroughly antagonistic against Christianity during the Tokugawa period and since. I am convinced that so long as the Christian churches do not radically change tneir traditional way, Christianity cannot possibly enter into rural Japan. The Christianity of Japan so far is nothing but an urban Christianity. The life of clergy is so completely foreign to the life of farmers."

With regard to the effect of the Academy he says, "Modern rural youths who have received a thoroughly materialistic education buck against Christianity with all their strength, but the power of the truth contained in the Bible finally conquers them and during the last week most of them reach the point of professing faith in God, offering fervent prayers, and pledging themselves to study the Bible for the rest of their life.

"The greatest trouble with the rural villages of Japan today is that the youth hate farming and migrate to the city en masse. More particularly, girls of the rural villages almost without exception hate to marry farmers.

Their highest ambition is to marry salaried men in the cities." This situation is at last beginning to change, thanks to the Aino-kai movement. Mr. Kotani continues : "In recent years there are increasing numbers of marriages taking place between alumni of the Agricultural Academy and the Bridal Academy. This is a radical departure from the traditional pattern of marriage. I, for one, believe that with the young couples bound together by one and the same faith, forming God-centered families, and in mutual love working for peace and happiness of all people, it is now possible to envisage real community development in rural Japan."

One may wonder what the relationship is between this movement and the organized churches, but one thing is certain, and that is, in it we find an unprecedented opportunity for the Christian Gospel to penetrate into the heart of the rural Japan, not as an intellectualized propositional faith but as a motivating force to remake the life of rural people from within.